



# Sacred Heart UNIVERSITY

Testimony for the  
Higher Education Committee  
Sacred Heart University  
March 8, 2022

On behalf of Sacred Heart University, we offer our support for HB 5137: AN ACT STUDYING AND FUNDING THE ROBERTA B. WILLIS SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM which seeks to make significant changes to the Roberta Willis Scholarship.

I want to thank you for your ongoing support of independent colleges in Connecticut by maintaining funding for need-based financial aid through this program. Unfortunately, the need is so great that we must do much more. Providing funding for need-based financial aid, which will provide access and opportunity to higher education for low-income residents of this state is critically important, and I hope that you will make a real commitment to the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program.

CT Viewpoints recently published an op-ed that Sacred Heart University John J. Petillo wrote on this very topic. In that piece, he pointed out that Connecticut—one of the wealthiest states in the country—lags behind most states in providing financial support for students who want to attend college. That support largely manifests through grants and low-interest loans to aspiring undergraduates. Without it, Black, Latino and indigenous students are disproportionally limited from affording a post-high-school education.

Sadly, only 28% of eligible Connecticut students received a state need-based grant in fiscal year 2019—11,093 of 39,389 eligible students—and the estimated state grant per undergraduate enrollment, at \$259 per student trailed the national average of \$721. What's more, the percentage allocated to need-based aid in neighboring states was dramatically higher. New York invested 15%, New Jersey 23%, Vermont and Pennsylvania tied at 22% and Connecticut crawled across the finish line at 3%.

Numbers like these will ensure that students will choose to get their education elsewhere and likely won't be back to fill the jobs that are going begging here.

These numbers make it clear that the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program needs an overhaul. Funding need-based college financial aid programs is a necessity, not a luxury. We need to make assisting the neediest students a priority, which will increase Connecticut's college attainment rates—also among the worst in the country.

I would suggest the following:

1. **Use the budget surplus to fund the Willis Scholarship program prospectively.** Use \$33 million to provide prospective funding for FY24 for the program so that students, institutions and their families can begin to know in advance what levels of financial aid is available to them while they are making enrollment decisions for the fall of 2023.

2. **Hire a national consultant to redesign the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program.** Many states have a need-based financial aid program that follows the student to the institution of their choice and provides notice of eligibility to students based simply on the completion of a FAFSA. Connecticut needs to move to this model and align with an entity such as the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to develop a new program for implementation in 2024 that would include significant investments in aid and more timely awards to our state's neediest students.
3. **Increase funding for FY23 and FY24.** In 2019-2020, CT enrolled 130,554 undergraduate students with a state financial aid budget of approximately \$34 million. This equates to approximately \$260 per pupil. The national average in-state spending for need-based grant aid is \$721. Even if Connecticut were to double its investment, we still would be significantly below the national average. Additional funding is needed to ensure low-income Connecticut students have adequate state support to access post-secondary education.

The independent colleges play an important role in educating students for our state's workforce. We award the majority of the degrees earned in key growth areas such as engineering, computer science, research and the health sciences. Many of our graduates do internships and residencies in-state and often choose to remain in Connecticut after graduating. As these numbers shrink, so will the interest of employers in remaining in or relocating to Connecticut.

Funding for need-based aid for students attending all of our state's institutions of higher education must continue to be a priority. It is a critical tool for both retaining much-needed young talent in Connecticut and for providing access for low-income students.

If we choose to ignore these gaps in achievement and education funding, the long-term results for Connecticut will be disastrous. Students and their parents will continue looking elsewhere for their college education, and current and future employers will follow.

Thank you.

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